Doing Write at Last

By Nikky Finney

Back home there was a small, sun-bathed corner in the basement of the colored branch of the public library. In this spot, if I leaned back far enough, the arms of the walls would take me like a southern baptism and let me disappear into the covers of favorite books. Once under I'd stay submerged for as long as my 11-year-old imagination could hold its breath. It was there that I asked why mystery and inquisitiveness seemed only writable if you were angel-cake–colored and calm in the face of adversity. I wanted to know where were the emotion, the passion, the intensity that I saw all around me in the southern Black communities that were my home.

I started reading because Papa tossed books up to me on my grandfather's grain loft. The inscriptions were always the same: "Find your own way to make the world right." I learned the succinctness of thought in script the first time I saw several tiny, hand-painted signs nailed to trees along a South Carolina highway. They read simply DO RIGHT.

> **"Black women writers are making a difference in the way we feel about ourselves."**

On my fifteenth birthday Mama gave me Lorraine Hansberry. She folded a starched handkerchief around a theater ticket and pointed me in the direction of an auditorium where a northern touring company was performing Hansberry's play, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. I made a seat in a window sill, watched my mother's gift unfold and felt my life changing as my hands sprouted tiny wings in the dark.

As the only girlchild I was given books by Black women writers instead of the keys to the car. We became inseparable. At Talladega College a fast-talking professor always passed me, dreaming under my favorite oak. "Miss Finney," she would say without missing a breath, "you don't have the option not to always have book or pen in hand."

Since then I have become a writer, and I know that we, as Black women and as writers, are up against the odds. From poetry to story to novel, the typical historical and contemporary responses to us have been born out of ignorance and discrimination. In general, our lives have not been thought suitable for copyright privileges or hardcover publishing deals; we have not been considered legitimate or interesting. As readers, we too have set standards that are shortsighted and archaic, trying to cramp our writers' style with restrictions such as "But we just don't know any Black folks like that."

We have been too terribly cautious. And as younger writers we are also guilty of waiting for the right time to write the right truth. We seem to be afraid of jeopardizing our "position" among the few who are "making it." Instead, every poem, every story, every line that we are courageous enough to feel should be made manifest.

For the first time, thanks to Black women writers, the Black woman is appearing as multidimensional. This newly depicted woman has different sides and tastes and preferences. She is passionate and complex and iconoclastic, sometimes maudlin and sometimes driven. She has missed some boats and has sometimes been known to jump ship. But she is buoyant. We who know these truths are responsible for writing them.

It is sustaining to see the results of this image reconstruction taking shape. I think Black women writers should know they are making a difference in the way we Black women look and feel about ourselves. The daring new postures we are taking in life can easily be aligned with the daring chances our women writers are taking on the page.

The voices that will lead us out of cavernous ways of thinking are the voices of Black women writers: whispering our own stories, easy like the smell of honeysuckle in the wind; loving hard and out loud, the way a train hangs on to the track, unembarrassed and unpretentious—with our third, poetic eye ever focused. We are the ones with the double discriminations, the triple jeopardies, but also the octagonal sensibilities, the six-chambered hearts. We offer ourselves up, not as dispensable scouting pigeons, but as soft, nostril-flared torches by which the world may better see itself, as hip-swinging rope bridges by which humanity may move from different sides to the center, as cotton-flannel raindrops that fall and make us all feel again. As peacocks of peace who will continue to raise our children and all kinds of hell—and to make honest attempts to do right.

Poet Nikky Finney's first collection, On Wings Made of Gauze, was published last year (William Morrow). She lives in Atlanta where she is working on a novel.

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